

The Preface to Theodorus Priscianus’ *Phýsica*

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Introduction

While I began this issue of *SARTRIX* by disavowing a strong distinction between ancient and modern literature,¹ the oracle I quoted from Diogenes Laërtius—that one should “take on the complexion of the dead”, i.e., “read the ancients” to “live best”²—may seem to take that same distinction for granted. But it really does not, as ‘antiquity’ only came to be defined as a period with definite boundaries in modern historiography. By contrast, the text presented in this article (in its first English translation, so far as I know) evinces a conception of antiquity that is more open relative to the present and future, and which encourages us to interpret the meaning of “reading the ancients” far more broadly.

The *Phýsica*³ are—or were—the fourth book of the *Eupórista* of Theodorus Priscianus (4th/5th century CE), a compendium of remedies that are “easily obtained”, as the Greek title promises. I say “were”, because the transmitted text of the *Phýsica* breaks off soon after the portion translated here. Even with this loss, the preface is an important document of medical theory dealing with what were called physical (i.e., ‘natural’) remedies, providing a counterpoint to the hostile description by a Christian contemporary of Theodore’s, the infamous Augustine of Hippo:⁴

To this kind pertain all bindings (*ligātúrae*) and remedies which even the discipline of the medics⁵ condemns, whether by incantations (*praecantātiōnēs*), or by certain marks which they call *charactérēs*, or by certain things that are suspended and bound, or even fastened in a certain way,⁶ not for the treatment of bodies, but for the sake of certain significations, either hidden or even manifest. They call these by the rather mild name of *phýsica*, so that they may not seem to involve superstition, but to benefit from nature. Such are earrings on the tip of one ear, or rings of ostrich bones on a finger, or when you are hiccupping and someone tells you to hold your left thumb in your right hand.⁷

¹ See “What Is the Use of Studying Ancient Literature?”, p. 1 above.

² See “Take on the Complexion of the Dead”, p. 3 above.

³ Or *Phýsicá*, if the word is accentuated as Greek.

⁴ Augustine knew Theodorus’ teacher Vindicianus (*Confessions* 4.3.5, 7.6.8).

⁵ The practitioners of medicine, ‘physicians, doctors, healers’.

⁶ These are the aforementioned bindings, things that are bound to the body or hanged on it in some way, such as pendants, rings, and amulets.

⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Learning* 2.75. I translate from the Latin text of Roger P. H. Green, *Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana*, Clarendon Press 1995, except that I prefer the reading *aptándis* (“fastened”) over *saltándis*, which Green translates as “making things dance”.

Theodore not only claims that these remedies “benefit from nature”, but also that they are taught by nature, in the sense that animals know them instinctively and (it is implied) humanity has learned them from the animals. The manner in which they work is through the sympathy or antipathy between the natural “powers” of different animals and materials; in other words, some are mutually beneficial, others harmful, and often in unexpected ways. Theodore admits that he cannot give reasons for the particular remedies’ efficacy, and even claims that the philosopher Democritus forbade inquiring into them. Nevertheless, he gives an outline of a theory, which he attributes to the “Egyptian knowledge” of Pythagoras, namely that different body parts belong to different gods, whom the remedies placate through sympathy or overcome through antipathy. Judging from his examples, diseases also seem to be assigned to particular deities.

Theodore asks forgiveness from the “earlier fathers” (*pátrēs priôrēs*) that he cannot give explanations of the particular remedies’ workings, a failure he attributes to the ignorance of his age, which has “forgotten the reasonings of your discourses”. As for his own work, he does not claim to present new knowledge, but opinions held by the ancients, that is, by authors already dead. As a contemporary writer, he does not expect recognition for himself, but hopes to receive it from posterity (*pósteri*) after his own death, when he will also be one of the ancients, no longer subject to envy.

Note on the translation

The following translation represents only the first three of seven chapters remaining of the *Phýsica*, to say nothing of the previous three books of the *Eupórista*. The Latin text I have used is that of Valentin Rose,⁸ but I would have failed to understand many of Theodore’s turns of phrase without Kai Brodersen’s German translation.⁹

Theodorus Priscianus, *Physica* 1–3

1. In writing about physical learning (*dè fýsicā sciéntiā*), which I understand delights you very greatly, I think the extraordinary demonstration of the comic poet Menander suffices for the commendation of my work. It is said that, when, during his years of study, he suffered envy for his great learning among his fellow citizens, he led a sow big with offspring into the theater; for this had the position of the most celebrated auditorium for eloquence among the Athenians. He led a pregnant sow, I say, before an expectant audience, and there, her uterus was cut out of her and <her piglets were cast> into a trench. And when, although they were almost killed, they

⁸ Valentin Rose, *Theodori Prisciani Euporiston libri III cum Physicorum fragment et additamentis pseudo-Theodoreis*, Teubner 1894.

⁹ Kai Brodersen, *Theodorus Priscianus, Naturheilkunde*, De Gruyter 2020.

nevertheless moved at the prompting of nature,¹⁰ he said: “Men of Athens, if you marvel at my learning at such a young age, who taught these to swim?”

2. Hence, you may take note, Eusebius, sweetest of my little children, of a proof that is dear to me. For I especially delight in your recognition of my labor, and that you will be the audience for my writing. You may take note, I meant, how much nature's power is apparent in all elements, in their seed¹¹ and in the animals; not without purpose are their powers at odds or connected with each another.¹² Sheep fed on the herb *alcyónium*¹³ are in danger, but they are quickly healed when its root is taken. To take a draught from mules¹⁴ is poison, but their meats are given to eat as a remedy. Dogs are cured of stomach pain by eating grass. And the ugly pig disperses mist when it grazes on a field. And missiles thrown from a *thêca*¹⁵ are drawn out using dittany. And the life of the long-lived stag changes with the antlers attached to them.¹⁶ And (the birds) who share the name of common swallow wort clear the eyes of their chicks with (these) herbs.¹⁷ To the last, all-bearing nature has attended to all animals in the greatness that belongs to her. For she who has distributed the lot of being born did not withhold the means of living and being healthy. For in the whole word, there is nature, which works a grand secret. But I never cease to marvel at this, why irrational beings, wandering birds and wild beasts, attain closer to the benefits of nature.

3. You will forgive my effort compiled above, forefathers, for this uncultured age of the world has forgotten the reasonings of your discourses, the origin of the diseases of animals, and things like these.¹⁸ Pythagoras, an important author of Egyptian knowledge,¹⁹ writes that the individual members of our body belong to celestial powers,²⁰ whence it is that we use either contrary things, by which they are overcome, or concordant ones, by which they are placated.²¹ It is also for this reason that the Romans set up a temple to Fever, and that antiquity claimed that the quartan²²

¹⁰ “Prompting” translates *dóctū*, more literally “teaching”, apparently the ablative of a rare noun *híc dóctus*, *húius dóctūs*, if the manuscript reading is to be retained.

¹¹ The ‘seeds’ of the elements are small particles that constitute them, or from which they come.

¹² Theodore is referring to sympathy and antipathy, of which he goes on to list some examples.

¹³ This is not the genus of soft coral now called alconium, but what exactly is meant, I am unsure.

¹⁴ Kai Brodersen interprets this as “the urine of mules”. As noted in Valentin Rose’s apparatus, Hermann von Neuenahr emended the text to read “A draught of mules’ blood.”

¹⁵ The word usually means ‘sheath’ or ‘cover’. Brodersen tentatively suggests ‘sling’ or ‘tube’.

¹⁶ The idea is that a stag rejuvenates when the antlers are shed and regrown.

¹⁷ Rose has emended the Latin of this sentence boldly, but in my estimation more or less correctly. If he is right, the meaning is that swallows (gr. *chelidónes*) use swallow wort (lat. *chelidónium*) to heal eyesight.

¹⁸ Theodore is apologizing for not providing explanations for the examples in paragraph 2.

¹⁹ “Egyptian knowledge” (*aegyptia sciéntia*) should not be taken in an ethnic sense, but rather refers to a kind of priestly or ‘magical’ expertise. I hope to discuss this common secondary meaning of ‘Egyptian’ at greater length in the future.

²⁰ I.e., different body parts are assigned to different gods.

²¹ This creates an equivalence (up to a point) between physical remedies and propitiatory rituals or offerings.

²² The manuscript has *certanas*, which may be emended to either *tertiánās* or *quártánās*, i.e., “tertian” or “quartan” fevers. These diseases are now understood as forms of malaria.

fevers are the daughters of Saturn.²³ In curing the latter, Democritus says that a pollution is necessary, like the wrongful killing of a menstruating woman or of sacred birds, or the meats of forbidden animals given for food, or a draught of blood. He also teaches that epilepsy, which they have called the ‘sacred disease’ (*ierḗn nóson*),²⁴ proclaiming the power of its efficacy and forbidding to inquire into the reason. But we are not the first to reveal these things. It does not pain me to admit, my opinions are shared with the ancients. I too will rather please posterity with what I am going to write. Nor is it surprising if I have no fame among the living; a reader does not love their own times. Hence, there is that very famous distich of the satirical (poet):²⁵

Few theaters applauded garlanded Menander,
And his own times ridiculed Maeonides.²⁶

My teacher too, whom I already mentioned I have made use of,²⁷ was considered good when he was alive, but now he, Vindicianus, is celebrated in the whole world. And indeed, no one’s worth has ever been honored duly in their own time, either because they remain subject to envy and fortune among the living, or because recognition spreads after death as grief arises from the misfortune.

²³ To my knowledge, this tradition is not attested elsewhere. I imagine that it might be derived it from an incantation.

²⁴ Theodore uses the Greek term, ἱερὸν νόσον, spelled in Roman letters.

²⁵ Martial, *Epigrams* 5.10.8–9, quoted by Theodorus in reverse order and in slightly different wording.

²⁶ The ‘son of Maeon’ is Homer.

²⁷ Theodorus Priscianus, *Eupórista* 3.21, where he simply called him “my teacher” (*magíster méus*).